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Faith and the Absent Savior in Central Station

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Abstract
Walter Salles' 1998 film *Centro do Brasil* (*Central Station*) is a compelling religious allegory of God's children, forsaken in a strange land, seeking the faith needed to wait for the Savior's return. Although the film was not widely viewed as religious, *Central Station* invites a theological reading as the story of human beings struggling to maintain a relationship to an absent God. The film depicts a world in which the characters must stake their lives on Jesus' return, a world in which his expected, imminent presence dominates and defines reality. In his absence, the eschatological hope of Christ fills the void of human sojourning, thereby (paradoxically) creating a powerful representation of Christ.

The Christ figure is a recognized feature of cinematic character and plot throughout the world. Jesus Christ's sacrificial death and triumphal victory have become an archetype to which filmmakers refer to give their characters transcendent significance. It must be understood, of course, that the story of Christ is in itself a reference to the far more ancient archetype of the dying and resurrected god.[1] However, the global influence of Christianity in the twentieth century means that the gospel story is the primary referent of present-day tales of sacrifice and rebirth. Heroes of all kinds, from Lawrence of Arabia to Han Solo, have been assimilated to the Christian mythos.

Most of the Christ figures seen in film signal their presence more or less ostentatiously, often by striking a cruciform stance. Think, for example, of Willem Dafoe's outstretched arms and heavenward gaze in *Platoon*;[2] or the recent crop of apocalyptic disaster films with their accompanying savior-heroes: James Cole in *12 Monkeys*,[3] Jericho Cane in *End of Days*.[4] But the 1998 Brazilian film *Central Station*[5] (*Centro do Brasil*), directed by Walter Salles from a screenplay by Marcos Bernstein and João Emanuel Carneiro, presents a Christ figure with a difference. Here the Christ figure is not the hero – in fact, he is not even seen on screen. He is merely a potential presence, spoken of with great confidence, but never met in person.

This striking absence is so unusual for a Christ figure in film that, despite the copious internal clues that the film is a spiritual allegory, few critics caught on. Neither Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*[6] nor Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*[7] makes note of the Christian parallels. An internet review by Peter Brunette compares the film's quest structure to the journey of Telemachus in *The Odyssey*, and complains that characters such as a fundamentalist truck driver are out of place.[8] Even Michael Elliot, "The Christian Critic," fails to see what seems to me obvious symbolism.[9]

My first task in this paper, therefore, will be to document the evidence that *Central Station* functions as a Christian allegory. The mere fact that very few viewers apparently saw it in this way, while the film nevertheless was critically acclaimed and won many international awards, demonstrates that *Central Station* operates on at least two distinct levels. On the level at which most viewers encountered it, the film is the story of how a motherless boy opens the heart of a crusty spinster as the two journey in search of the boy's father. And it seems that this level is more or less satisfying and complete. Unlike allegories such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which require reference to the reality being symbolized for their sense, *Central Station* appears to function perfectly well, for most viewers, as a story for its own sake. The second level openly refers to a spiritual journey, for which the physical journey undertaken by the characters is a

transparent foil. Seen on this level, *Central Station* documents a movement from skepticism (a natural response to the absurd, transitory situation of human existence) to faith (brought forth not by a compelling and self-validating religious experience, but by the very absence of the savior who is sought). The elaboration of this theme in theological terms will form a coda to the presentation.

I will begin by recounting as briefly as possible the story told in *Central Station*. Fernanda Montenegro plays Dora, a former elementary schoolteacher who supplements her retirement income by writing letters for travelers in Rio de Janeiro's train station. Among her customers is a young woman with a boy in tow, dictating a letter to Jesus, the boy's father. It seems Jesus is the worst thing that ever happened to Ana, the mother, but the boy still wants to meet him. Dora gathers the day's letters, takes the train home, and spends the evening with her friend Irene deciding what letters to post, what letters to tear up and throw away, and what letters to save for a later decision. Ana's letter falls into the last category, and Dora stores it in a drawer that Irene calls a "purgatorio." The next day, however, Ana and her son Josué are back at Dora's desk to write a less angry, more flattering letter. But as they leave the station, Ana is run down by a bus and killed. Josué is now motherless and fatherless, alone in Rio.

After Dora repeatedly spots the boy sleeping in the train station, she offers him food and shelter. She plans to give the boy to an adoption agency that promises

to find him a wealthy family, and in return, she receives money which she uses to buy a new television. But when Irene protests that the agency is a cover for an organ-harvesting scheme, Dora returns and kidnaps Josué. Unable to go home because a man from the false agency is after her, Dora buys two bus tickets to Bom Jesus da Norte (Good Jesus of the North), in the interior of Brazil, where Ana had said Josué's father, Jesus, was living. The two set off together.

At one of the bus' stops, Dora tucks money in Josué's backpack and sneaks away as he sleeps. But as the bus pulls away from the station, she finds that the boy has followed her and left his backpack, along with most of their money, behind. They catch a ride toward their destination with a truck driver named César, an evangelical who lives in his truck, which is decorated with Christian slogans. After César vouches for Dora and saves her from a shoplifting charge, Dora begins to have warm feelings toward this friendly savior. But when she lets her feelings show at a café, César panics and drives away, leaving them. A truckload of Catholic pilgrims on their way to Bom Jesus da Norte picks them up, taking their last cash, and transports them the rest of the way.

At the address on Ana's letter, they find that Jesus has moved out of town to "the new settlements" – street after street of identical houses. Having raised money at the Catholic carnival by selling Dora's services as a letter writer, they make their way to the new house, where they are told that Jesus has vanished into

the wilderness. But one of his sons, asks Dora to read a letter that has arrived from Jesus addressed to Ana. At this point, Moisés and Isaéas, the two sons of Jesus in Bom Jesus da Norte, do not know the identity of their visitors. Dora has introduced herself as a friend of Jesus, and Josué, who has been loudly proclaiming his identity the entire trip to anyone who would listen, becomes shy in the presence of his brothers and gives his name as Geraldo. In this scene, Dora reads Jesus' letter to the group:

> DORA: [reading] Ana, my misfortune. It was hard to find a letter writer to tell you that I finally understood that you went back and found our new little house, while I'm here in Rio looking for you. I hope I get back before this letter, but if it arrives before me, do as I say: wait for me. I'll be coming home, too.
>
> MOISÉS: The letter arrived six months ago.
>
> DORA: He's been held up. [reading] I left Moisés and to look after things.
>
> MOISÉS: To look after things? That's a joke!
>
> DORA: [reading] Ana, I may work in the mines for a month before coming home, but I'll be back. Please wait. Then we'll all be together: me, you, , Moisés, and Josué, who I can't wait to meet. You're a bad-tempered mule, but I'd give all I have to see you again. Forgive me. It's you and me, for life. Jesus.

The film ends as Dora leaves the town to go back to Rio, believing for the first time that Josué's father will return. During the course of the film we have learned that Dora's father left the family when she was young. She has never trusted men, never married, and repeatedly tries to remove Josué's stubborn illusions that Jesus will

welcome him into his family. But she believes the message of the letter, that Jesus will return, and for the first time urges Josué to live in faith rather than in a cynical, harsh reality.

This plot synopsis has already revealed many overt references to Christianity in the film, such as the Catholic pilgrims and the Protestant truck driver. Many of the further symbolic references to Christianity center around the theme of the Holy Family. Josué repeatedly stares at pictures of the Virgin and Child. It's clear that in the context of the plot, Dora is the virgin and Josué is the child. The boy is looking to complete the picture with a father. For both characters, the truck driver César (Caesar – representing the world as over against the divine) seems a hopeful candidate for that missing role; at the café, the waitress mistakes the three of them for a family group. But César leaves while Dora is putting on lipstick in the bathroom, while a distant voice sings "How Great Thou Art." After Dora faints while searching for Josué in the throng of pilgrims in Bom Jesus da Norte, the next scene shows Dora sleeping on a sidewalk with her head in Josué's lap, a gender-inverted Piéta. The man inhabiting the first house they visit in the town is named Jesse (a reference to King David's father and Jesus' ancestor); he points the way to Jesus. When they finally reach Jesus' house, there is a painting on the wall of father, mother and child – the first time Josué has seen a trinity rather than the Virgin-Child duality.

Perhaps part of the reason *Central Station* is not immediately seen as a film about Christian faith is that the family relationships are not fixed and directly referable to the Gospels. Jesus as the father and Josué (Joseph) as the son certainly represents an inversion of the hierarchy we expect. Yet in theological terms, the identity of Jesus and God the Father invites an interpretation in which all human beings find themselves to be sons and daughters. Moisés and, the sons of Jesus in the film, have the names of Hebrew prophets who, in the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, foretold and prefigured the coming of Jesus. Here they, too, are characterized as Jesus' sons; they work in their father's carpentry shop turning out furniture, though they do not consider themselves the equal of Jesus who built their house. The temporal inversion, in which forerunners become sons and sons become fathers, gives the film at least an initial resistance to a straightforward allegorical reading, and possibly contributes to most viewers' overlooking the Christian symbolism throughout. But we should remember that Jesus' literal human sonship is a pointer to the metaphorical sonship of the second person of the Trinity. Central Station prevents us from becoming stuck in that metaphor by emphasizing Christ's identity with the Father, especially as it is manifest for us in the church age, where the lordship of Christ and the promise of his return are the controlling topoi of our relationship to him.

I indicated in the introduction to this discussion that Christ figures in film are usually visible – indeed, they tend to be the central or key characters in the plot. What makes these characters Christ figures, however, is their sacrifice, usually involving suffering, bloodshed, and death. In fact, one might argue that the definition of the cinematic Christ figure is the embodiment of Christ's passion. The identification of a character with Christ occurs, for audiences and critics, when that character sacrifices him/herself for others, especially if the character is innocent in some way.[10] Recent films that signal the viewer in this direction are *The Green Mile*, in which an innocent man with healing power goes willingly to his death, and *The Iron Giant*, a children's film in which a robot built as a war machine decides to risk its own destruction to save human beings. Another factor in these examples which aids the identification of the Christ figure is the cognitive innocence of the characters; more important than their innocence in terms of deeds are their childlike minds. The key moment when these characters assume the mantle of Christhood is when they are empowered to choose sacrifice out of their newfound knowledge of reality.

By contrast, the invisible Christ of Central Station does not signal his identity with a sacrificial act. His chief defining characteristic is his absence; all the other traits attached to him – his drunkenness, his carpentry, even his surname – recede to the status of rumors when confronted with the one indisputable fact we

know about Jesus: he is not here. Given his absence, the other characters in the film are free to decide for themselves how they will view him. Josué clings to his heroic conception of his father as the leader of a family, a provider; Dora embellishes Ana's brief description with details about Jesus' drinking and physical abuse; Moisés has become so comfortable with his hatred of his father that he does not want his image shattered by Jesus' words in the letter. So Jesus' absence forces all the characters to determine the relationship for themselves. Dora's final response of faith, an adult appropriation of Josué's continual childlike faith, is only meaningful in light of this absence. Even the letter from Jesus is not enough hard evidence to compel belief. As Josué continually points out in his dealings with Dora, human beings lie and break their promises. Dora's life has provided her with a mass of hard, incontrovertible evidence that points toward withholding faith and trust as the only sane way of living. Yet as she and Josué follow the void that Jesus has left, she is convinced by the absence as she could not have been by the presence.

The allegory of *Central Station* does not replay the central historical act of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Christ, as do most films that reference the Christ archetype. Instead it is an allegory of the present day, of the individual alone in a world of travelers and destinations, with no clear evidence for the truth of Christianity and plenty of evidence against it. The individual has appointed herself God over the relationships of others, enabling and restricting

communication between them as she chooses. The message she eventually appropriates for herself, though it is not outwardly addressed to her, removes her from this position of power. The decision to accept the reality of this invisible relationship entails accepting its determining power. No longer is she free to decide how she wishes to be related to others. She is now part of a network of relations, a family, governed by the expectation of its head's return. When seen as a spiritual story about the absent Christ, *Central Station* explodes the myth of autonomy – of the individual who is, literally, a law unto herself – that pervades even some Christian thinking about relationships. The faith relationship with Christ, the film argues, is not one among many chosen by the individual's exercise of freedom. Like a parental relationship, it is present and operative even in the absence of the parties, and even when rejected. And as the ultimate parental relationship, of Creator to creature, its recognition entails the transformation of all relationships.

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[1] Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return; Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 108-110; Sir James Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New York: S.G. Phillips, 1959), pp. 354-356.

[2] Oliver Stone, 1986.

[3] Terry Gilliam, 1995.

[4] Peter Hyams, 1999.

[5] Produced by Martine de Clermont-Tonnerre and Arthur Cohn for Le Studio Canal (France) and Riofilme (Brazil). Distributed in the U.S. by Sony Pictures Classics.

[6] ttp://www.nytimes.com/library/film/112098central-film-review.html (posted November 20, 1998, accessed January 28, 2000).

[7] http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1998/12/122507.html (accessed January 28, 2000).

[8] http://www.film.com/reviews/index.jhtml?review_url=/film-review/1998/10361/100/default-review.html (accessed January 28, 2000).

[9] http://www.christiancritic.com/movies/centrals.htm (accessed January 28, 2000).

[10] See Lloyd Baugh's discussion of filmic models of the Christ figure in *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and the Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), pp. 211-225. Baugh identifies eight models, including the saint, the child, and the adventure hero; all his examples revolve.